

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**CHINA'S LESS AGGRESSIVE APPROACH TO TAIWAN REUNIFICATION:
A CHANGE IN STRATEGY OR TACTICS?**

by

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This SRP is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Strategic Studies Degree. The views expressed in this student academic research paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE 03 MAY 2004	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED -		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE China's Less Aggressive Approach to Twiwan Reunification: A Change in Strategy or Tactics		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
		5b. GRANT NUMBER		
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S) Douglas Frison		5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
		5e. TASK NUMBER		
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College,Carlisle Barracks,Carlisle,PA,17013-5050		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT See attached file.				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: a. REPORT unclassified		17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 27	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
b. ABSTRACT unclassified				
c. THIS PAGE unclassified				

ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Lieutenant Colonel Douglas Frison

TITLE: China's Less Aggressive Approach to Taiwan Reunification: A Change in Strategy or Tactics?

FORMAT: Strategy Research Project

DATE: 18 February 2004 PAGES: 27 CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

China has a vital national interest in exercising sovereignty over the island of Taiwan. This vital interest is directly linked to political legitimacy for the ruling Chinese Communist Party and is fueled by rising Chinese nationalism. Taiwan, meeting all requirements of a sovereign state except international recognition as such, has a vital interest in preventing Chinese sovereignty. The stakes in this dispute are enormous for China and Taiwan, with the United States caught in the middle.

In the 1990s, frustrated by Taiwan's failure to enter into reunification negotiations, the Chinese used aggressive rhetoric and military exercises to deter Taiwan from a path towards declaring independence. In 1996, to dissuade voters from supporting Taiwanese President Lee Tung-hui in his bid to be Taiwan's first popularly elected president, the Chinese conducted missile tests in which missiles with live warheads were fired to points near Taiwan's largest ports. The 1996 missile tests prompted President Clinton to order two carrier battle groups into the Taiwan Strait, the 100 mile wide body of ocean separating Taiwan from Mainland China. Lee won the election. In 2000, the Chinese mobilized a portion of the People's Liberation Army, threatened military exercises and bombarded Taiwan with aggressive rhetoric to dissuade voters from electing pro-independence candidate Chen Shui-bian as President. Chen won the election. Since mid-2000, however, the Chinese have been relatively quiet, diplomatically and militarily, over the issue of unification with Taiwan. Verbal and press attacks on Taiwanese leaders have been toned down and are directed more at issues than at the leaders personally. Even with the increased tension between China and Taiwan in the lead-up to the March 2004 election, China has refrained from conducting coercive military actions. This paper will examine the possible reasons for China's shift away from its aggressive approach toward Taiwan and whether the shift indicates a change in strategy or a change in tactics.

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CHINA'S LESS AGGRESSIVE APPROACH TO TAIWAN REUNIFICATION: A CHANGE IN STRATEGY OR TACTICS?

China has a vital national interest in exercising sovereignty over the island of Taiwan. This vital interest is directly linked to political legitimacy of the ruling Chinese Communist Party and is fueled by rising Chinese nationalism. Taiwan, meeting all requirements of a sovereign state except international recognition as such, has a vital interest in preventing Chinese sovereignty. The stakes in this dispute are enormous for China and Taiwan, with the United States caught in the middle. Many experts consider the continuing stalemate over unification, with no end in sight, to pose the greatest single threat to peace in Asia.¹

Beginning in the mid-1990s, China became frustrated with the lack of progress on Taiwan unification and angered by Taiwan's "creeping separatism." In what appeared to be a shift away from the Deng era policy of "peaceful reunification," China resorted to coercive measures such as conducting missile tests near Taiwan, mobilizing People's Liberation Army (PLA) units in areas across the Strait from Taiwan, and conducting military exercises in coastal areas near Taiwan. A steady stream of rhetoric threatening military action against Taiwan flowed from China's leaders and the Chinese press. These coercive measures were aimed at influencing the Taiwanese electorate, and persuading Taiwanese leaders to resume negotiations under the "one China" principle. After the March 2000 Taiwanese presidential election, however, China seemed to step back and take a less aggressive approach to Taiwan reunification. Chinese leaders rarely mentioned Taiwan in meetings with foreign visitors or the foreign press and the previously harsh rhetoric decreased in frequency and vitriol. China has not attacked, as it once did, each perceived improvement in United States-Taiwan relations or each proposed sale of U.S. weapons to Taiwan. While the rhetoric is again flowing in the lead-up to the March 2004 Taiwanese presidential election, there have been no missile tests, mobilizations or exercises directed at influencing Taiwan leaders or the Taiwanese populace. Has China changed its Taiwan reunification strategy or are the Chinese merely adjusting their short term-tactics?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The struggle to gain control of and govern the vast nation of China is one of the epic stories of the twentieth century. From 1927 to 1949 the Chiang Kai-shek led Nationalist government battled the Mao Zedong led Chinese Communist Party for governance of China, while both attempted to fend off the Japanese from the mid-1930s to Japanese defeat in 1945. The fight for Mainland China ended in 1949 when Chiang Kai-shek and the remnants of the Nationalist government fled to Taiwan in the face of military defeat on the Mainland.

In early 1950, as Mao Zedong prepared a makeshift invasion fleet to carry the fight to Taiwan, the Truman administration was not inclined to intervene on behalf of the Nationalists, our erstwhile World War II allies. Secretary of State Dean Acheson declared in January, 1950, that Taiwan held no strategic interest for the United States.² The Nationalists' days on the stage of history seemed numbered. The Truman administration did an about face, however, with the beginning of the Korean War, and sent the U.S. Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait to prevent the Communist invasion of Taiwan.

With the increased division of the world into Western bloc and Eastern bloc countries, and owing to Mainland Chinese participation in the Korean War, Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government on Taiwan became an Asian bulwark for the United States in the containment of communism. The Republic of China (Taiwan) continued to represent China in the United Nations and other international organizations. In 1954 the United States entered into a mutual defense treaty with the Republic of China.

Throughout the fifties and sixties tensions between China and Taiwan often flared, with several minor military actions taking place. The United States stood firmly behind Taiwan, and extended generous economic and military aid to the Nationalists, while encouraging land, economic and political reform.

From 1968, U.S relations with China began to thaw, as the United States increasingly viewed good relations with China as a counterweight to Soviet power. China was admitted to the United Nations in 1971, and Taiwan expelled. President Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972 set the stage for establishing formal diplomatic relations with China, but the resulting Shanghai Communiqué treated the Taiwan issue with deliberate ambiguity.³

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter accorded full diplomatic recognition to China and abrogated the U.S.-Taiwan mutual defense treaty. President Carter formally acknowledged the Chinese "one China" policy. The U.S. Congress, miffed by President Carter's one China policy and perceived abandonment of Taiwan, quickly passed the Taiwan Relations Act, the first U.S. law establishing guidelines for Washington's relations with another country.⁴ The act provides for the sale of defensive military equipment and services to Taiwan to maintain sufficient self-defense capabilities. The Act also states that it is U.S. Policy to consider "any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States."⁵ President Carter reluctantly signed the bill. All subsequent U.S. administrations, including the current Bush administration, have adhered to the "one China"

principle, while also maintaining *de facto* diplomatic relations with Taiwan and approving continued arms sales to Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act.

NATIONAL INTERESTS

There are several fundamental propositions from which any analysis of the China-Taiwan issue must begin. First, China has a vital national interest in exercising sovereignty over the island of Taiwan. This vital interest has not changed since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) declared victory over the Nationalists on the Mainland and established the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1950. The status of Taiwan is closely associated with the CCP's domestic legitimacy. With the return of Hong Kong in 1997 and of Macau in 1999, Chinese leaders see Taiwan as the last remaining obstacle to completion of the communist revolution and restoration of the Chinese nation after a century and a half of foreign intervention and civil strife. National unification is identified as one of "the three historical tasks of the Chinese people in the new century."⁶ Shortly before traveling to the United States to meet with President Bush in mid-December 2003, PRC Premier Wen Jiabao emphasized to U.S. reporters that in regard to Taiwan "The Chinese people will pay any price to safeguard the unity of the motherland."⁷

The CCP has long fostered nationalism over the Taiwan issue and the desire to unify the "motherland" as a means of building unity and drawing attention away from internal problems.⁸ This is especially true now, in an age when few Chinese are interested in communist ideology and few believe in Marxism-Leninism or Mao Zedong thought. Chinese leaders also regard control over Taiwan as an important step in establishing Chinese influence in East Asia and blunting American influence. The loss of Taiwan through independence would be a critical blow to the Chinese regime. China will not give up its over fifty-year claim to Taiwan. Only the military might of the United States for the past half a century has prevented China from fulfilling the quest for reunification with Taiwan.

Second, Taiwan has a vital interest in preventing Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan. This vital interest is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, and, in fact, appears to be of increasing importance to Taiwanese leaders. The continued economic and political advancement of Taiwan and the much greater personal freedoms enjoyed by the Taiwanese has led to a growing sense of identity separate and apart from the Mainland. The democratization of Taiwan has led to the rise to political power of native Taiwanese, at the expense of the Mainlanders (and their descendants) who fled to Taiwan with the Nationalists in 1949. The people of Taiwan increasingly view eventual unification with the Mainland as undesirable, although a majority is for maintaining the "status quo," for fear of provoking a

military response from China. Interestingly, the factions in Taiwan most supportive of eventual unification with China are found within the island's armed forces and the Kuomintang (KMT), legacies from Chiang Kai-shek's retreat to Taiwan in 1949. Recently, even the KMT leadership has publicly discarded eventual reunification as a party platform.

Third, the United States has an important national interest, but not a vital national interest, in ensuring the dispute between China and Taiwan is settled peacefully. Even a limited war between China and the United States over Taiwan would be incredibly destructive diplomatically and economically for both nations, not to mention Taiwan. Failure of the United States to come to the aid of Taiwan in case of a Chinese attack, on the other hand, would destroy U.S. credibility in East Asia and seriously damage U.S. alliances with other East Asian countries.⁹ U.S. interests in the China-Taiwan issue may be reputational more than strategic, but nevertheless are important if the United States is to maintain geostrategic influence in the Western Pacific and East Asia.¹⁰ The United States has stood between China and Taiwan for over fifty years, and may continue to do so for another fifty years, as there is currently no peaceful solution to China-Taiwan unification that is acceptable to both China and Taiwan.

Fourth, China poses a substantial military threat to Taiwan, even though China may not be strong enough militarily to invade and occupy Taiwan successfully. Taiwan, on the other hand, poses little offensive military threat to China (or any other country). For the time being China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) seems to pose a direct threat to the United States only if the United States becomes involved in a China-Taiwan cross-Strait military conflict, and then likely only to the extent of American military assets in the Western Pacific.

USE OF FORCE FOR REUNIFICATION

China has long indicated that it may use force against Taiwan if "a grave turn of events occurs leading to the separation of Taiwan from China," or "if Taiwan is invaded and occupied by foreign countries." In a 2000 white paper entitled "The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue" China added a third condition under which it may use force: If the Taiwan authorities refuse indefinitely to agree to a peaceful reunification through negotiations. Boiled down, this means that China may resort to force if the United States bases military forces on Taiwan, if Taiwan declares independence, or if Taiwan refuses over time to come to the table to discuss reunification. Although there appears to have been some discussion of setting a timetable and deadline for reunification in the aftermath of the events of 1999-2000, the results of this discussion are far from clear.¹¹ Beijing may have formulated an internal timetable for reunification, but has avoided public announcement of any timetable.¹² Were it not for the long

standing Chinese threat to use force, if necessary, Taiwan would almost certainly already have declared independence.¹³

CHINA-TAIWAN MILITARY BALANCE

Much has been written on whether Chinese armed forces currently have the ability to take Taiwan by force through amphibious assault, blockade, or coercive missile attacks, and if not, how long it will take China to acquire such a capability.¹⁴ The general consensus is that China currently lacks the capability to take Taiwan by invasion or blockade, even without U.S. intervention, and that coercive missile attacks alone will not force Taiwan to its knees. Some authorities argue that the military balance is tipping in favor of the Chinese and that by the end of this decade China will have a fairly decisive edge over Taiwan. Others argue that China's military power relative to Taiwan's military power, and regional United States power, will peak between 2005 and 2008, and that China's best chance of military success against Taiwan is during the present decade.¹⁵ Still others argue that China will not have the military capability to take Taiwan for decades.¹⁶

Many authorities, however, recognize that political requirements and not military strength are the essential determinants of whether China will resort to force to settle the Taiwan issue. If the current regime is threatened by domestic instability, the PLA, for internal political reasons, could be ordered to launch a military campaign against Taiwan even if the chances of success are slim.¹⁷ A formal declaration of Taiwanese independence would likely provoke China to act militarily against Taiwan. Chinese leaders are increasingly concerned about Taiwan's "creeping separatism," and the chance of some kind of military response to an act the Chinese view as a bold step toward independence is always possible.

REUNIFICATION STRATEGIES

From 1949 until the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 Chinese policy centered on military "liberation" of Taiwan, although China lacked the military means to conduct such an offensive, especially in the face of American intervention and the 1954 United States-Republic of China mutual defense treaty. Nevertheless, throughout the fifties and sixties tensions between China and Taiwan often flared, with China periodically shelling the small off-shore islands of Quemoy and Matsu, held by the Nationalists, and the Nationalists staging occasional "commando" type raids on the Mainland to blow up Chinese ships and harbor facilities. The United States stood firmly behind Taiwan, and extended generous economic and military aid to the Nationalists, and encouraged land, economic and political reform.

When Deng Xiaoping came to power in late 1978, China abandoned the policy of liberation of Taiwan through military means, and adopted a policy of “peaceful reunification.”¹⁸ This shift coincided with the United States’ shift in formal diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People’s Republic of China. In 1981 China announced a nine point proposal for Taiwan reunification that was more conciliatory and offered more specific concessions to Taiwan than ever before.¹⁹ This proposal became known as the “one country, two systems” formula which still stands as the basic Chinese framework for unification, and served as the model for the Chinese-British agreement for the return of Hong Kong in 1997. The PRC adopted a long-term horizon for unification and emphasized flexibility. In the minds of China’s leaders, they have been remarkably patient, forward thinking, and magnanimous. Moreover, Beijing has offered Taipei “a high degree of autonomy” and promised that the island could keep its economic and social systems intact following unification. While never renouncing the use of force against Taiwan if compelled, slow but steady improvement in China-Taiwan relations throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, particularly in the economic sphere, militated against Chinese use of force.

By the late 1980s burgeoning Taiwanese trade with, and investment in, China and cross-strait travel satisfied Chinese leaders that progress was being made toward eventual reunification. By 1990, Taiwanese businessmen were investing one billion dollars annually in China. By 1993 this figure had grown to 2.5 billion annually. The highpoint of improved China-Taiwan relations came in 1993, when the heads of quasi-governmental organizations from both China and Taiwan met in Singapore to discuss cross-strait intercourse and problems. Between 1993 and early 1995, 15 more meetings between representatives of the two quasi-governmental organizations took place to discuss problems of cross-strait exchanges.

Not all senior Chinese leaders were sanguine about the future of cross-strait relations and the pace of reunification. Many members of the PLA were distrustful of the Taiwanese leadership and viewed U.S. relations with Taiwan with suspicion. Many Chinese analysts and PLA leaders felt that with the end of the Cold War the United States determined that China was no longer needed as a counterweight to Soviet power, and had started to downgrade the importance of good relations with China. They felt that the United States was upgrading the importance of Taiwan in an overall policy aimed at containing China.²⁰ When President George Bush approved the sale of 150 F16 fighters to Taiwan in 1992, many PLA leaders called for a strong Chinese response. Deng Xiaoping, however, disapproved any military response. Sustaining China’s rapid economic growth and increasing regional influence took precedence over Taiwan reunification issues.

1995-1996 TAIWAN STRAIT MISSILE CRISIS

In May 1995, the United States issued a visa for Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui to travel to the United States to visit his alma mater, Cornell University, in June to deliver an address to an alumni group. No senior Taiwan official had been allowed to visit the United States since the United States shifted diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China in 1979. The issuance of the visa caught the Chinese by surprise, as they had earlier been assured by the U.S. government that Lee would not be granted the visa. This embarrassing turnaround angered Chinese senior leaders, but their anger was initially directed against the United States. In addition to issuing a strident formal protest to the United States, China recalled its ambassador, and cut short or cancelled high level meetings with U.S. officials. When President Lee subsequently visited the United States and made what the Chinese perceived as a provocative speech at Cornell University, the Chinese turned their anger toward President Lee and Taiwan, with the PLA leading the charge for a tough response to Taiwan.

In addition to a number of diplomatic moves to punish Taiwan, including the canceling of a second planned meeting of the heads of the two quasi-governmental organizations in Taipei, China launched a series of missile tests in the Taiwan Strait and assembled PLA troops in Fujian province for a series of military exercises that lasted from July 1995 to March 1996. In July 1995, the Chinese fired a total of six DF-15 ground to ground missiles from Fujian province to a target area around 90 miles from Taiwan's northern coast. These were followed by naval and aerial live fire exercises off the Fujian coast. In November 1995 the Chinese conducted air, land, and sea exercises in along the Fujian coast. In March, 1996, the Chinese launched more missiles, with target areas around fifty miles from the largest ports in northern and southern Taiwan and held additional exercises with around 40 naval vessels, 260 aircraft, and 150,000 troops.²¹

The military exercises in 1995 were a direct response to Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States and were a sign of China's great displeasure with Lee Teng-hui and the United States. The exercises in March 1996 were meant to intimidate the Taiwanese electorate shortly before Taiwan's first popular presidential election, in which President Lee was the leading candidate. A broader aim of the 1995-1996 exercises was to warn Taiwan away from seeking the path of independence. A further aim of the exercises was to send a clear message to the United States of the importance of Taiwan reunification and the consequences of straying from the "one-china" principle to which the United States had adhered since 1979.²²

When the United States sent two carrier battle groups to the vicinity of Taiwan in March 1996 in response to the Chinese missile firings and exercises, the Chinese were surprised.²³

The earlier missile tests and exercises had elicited only a muted response from Washington. The Chinese had no intention of actually launching an attack and likely believed the United States and Taiwan understood their actions as signaling and a warning to Taiwan not to stray too far from the fold. Regardless of whether testing U.S. resolve over Taiwan was an additional reason for conducting the missile tests and exercises, this response from the United States did send strong signals to the Chinese that the United States was serious about peaceful settlement of the Taiwan issue.

The economic and diplomatic sweeteners China extended to Taiwan from the late 1980s to 1995 had limited effect on Taiwan's position on reunification. In Beijing's view, while the 1995-1996 Strait Crisis was quite successful in chastening Taipei and, eventually, in improving relations with Washington, this success was only partial and temporary. Positive steps toward peaceful reunification, rebuffed by Taiwan, have been overshadowed by coercive measures aimed at preventing a Taiwanese slide toward independence. The hardening of the Taiwanese stance, together with the showing of American resolve during the missile crisis, reinforced the impetus for launching of an expansive modernization of its armed forces, with the key focus being PLA preparation for possible conflict in the Taiwan Strait.²⁴

POST MISSILE CRISIS

Since the 1996 missile crisis and Lee Teng-hui's election, PLA training, doctrine and procurement programs have focused on Taiwan attack or blockade scenarios.²⁵ China has sought help from Russia and Israel to create weapons designed specifically for a Taiwan combat scenario and possible United States intervention, including sophisticated aircraft, missiles, destroyers and other advanced technology.

China's external security situation has improved dramatically during the last 15 years. Between 1988 and 1994, China established diplomatic relations with 18 countries and with the Soviet successor states.²⁶ During the 1990s, China moved to resolve many territorial border disputes that had traditionally caused tension. Since 1991, China has settled border disputes with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Russia, Tajikistan, and Vietnam. Troop-reduction agreements signed in the 1990s have greatly reduced tensions with India. Similar agreements have been signed with Russia and Central Asian states.²⁷ Because of these moves, China's land borders have never been more secure. The increased security and reduced need for Chinese military attention along China's land borders has allowed the PLA to focus and concentrate resources on possible military action against Taiwan, and military modernization in support of such action.

The threat of force is increasingly China's only viable deterrent to Taiwanese independence. The roughly 450 short to medium range ballistic missiles that China has positioned within striking distance of Taiwan is China's major coercive tool, as Taiwan has no effective means of countering this threat.

A decisive factor guiding China's strategic modernization drive is a desire to deter the United States from intervention.²⁸ Many experts, however, agree that China's military is at least 20 years behind the United States in modernization and technology and that it will be several decades before the Chinese possess the capability to engage and defeat a modern adversary beyond China's borders.²⁹ In a Taiwan attack scenario, however, China currently aims not to defeat the United States, but to make intervention so costly in terms of lives and equipment, that political constraints may come into play to limit United States involvement.

The Chinese response to President Lee's Cornell visit marked a departure from the Deng era approach to peaceful reunification with Taiwan. Chinese strategy was altered to include a stick in addition to a carrot. While the Chinese have never renounced the use of force for reunification, in the Deng era China refrained from coercive measures in the belief that with the increasing economic integration of the Chinese and Taiwanese economies, time was on China's side. Additionally, in the Deng era, China generally lacked the military capability to pose a genuine threat to Taiwan. Purchases from Russia in the 1990s of advanced weapons systems such as fourth generation fighters, Sovremenny-class destroyers, and Kilo class submarines, together with advances in Chinese ballistic missile technology, gave China a coercive capability lacking in the past.

President Lee's Cornell visit, the 1996 Taiwanese Presidential election and President Lee's 1999 "state to state" comment infused the Chinese with the realization that Taiwanese democracy was challenging the "status quo" and that any gains made through economic integration could be rapidly lost through Taiwanese domestic political maneuvering.

2000 TAIWAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The Chinese leadership received another rude awakening to the derailment of reunification efforts in 2000, when pro-independence candidate Chen Shui-bien was elected to the Taiwan presidency despite Chinese pre-election threats of war and military mobilizations in the coastal regions of China. Chinese anger was also directed at the United States for the perceived failure of the Clinton administration to contain pro-independence sentiments in Taiwan.³⁰ President Chen alleviated the tension in his inauguration address when he declared that as president he would not seek independence.³¹ Despite the pre-election threats of war

and increased military activity in China's coastal regions opposite Taiwan, China did not engage in overtly aggressive military actions such as the 1995-96 missile tests.

CHINESE RESTRAINT

After the Chinese attempts to influence Taiwanese presidential elections and intimidate the electorate failed in 1996 and 2000, China seemed to pull back from its campaign of verbal attacks and threats. Relations between China and the United States, nose-diving after the April 2001 E-P3 incident, rebounded after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, after the Chinese quickly showed support for the United States and agreed to cooperate in some areas to combat terrorism. From the time the dust settled from the 2001 E-P3³² incident to the present (with the exception of recent strong statements from Beijing related to the upcoming presidential election in Taiwan), there has been a lull in cross-Strait tension and a relative lack of menacing rhetoric from Beijing, even in the face of continuing plans for US weapons sales to Taiwan and occasional provocative statements from President Chen. Chinese leaders no longer protest every mention of US arms sales to Taiwan or each indication of improved US-Taiwan relations. Various experts have noted that Chinese officials have stopped talking about Taiwan in conversations with foreign officials, visiting experts, and members of the foreign media,³³ at least until recently when Taiwan election campaign rhetoric has fanned the flames.

Beijing's response to President Chen's October 2003 visit to the United States was restrained compared to the response to Lee Tung-hui's visit to Cornell. Similarly, Beijing's response to President Chen's August 2002 statement that there exists "one country on each side of the Taiwan Strait" was restrained compared to the response to Lee Tung-hui's 1999 "state to state" comment.³⁴ In the 1996 and 2000 Taiwanese presidential elections, Beijing vilified Lee Tung-hui and Chen Shui-bian personally, with the goal of influencing the popular vote. In the lead-up to the March 2004 elections, Beijing is attacking not individual candidates, but issues, signaling its displeasure with President Chen's drive for a new constitution and plan to hold a referendum on the Chinese missile threat. China has not responded to the March 2004 elections with missile firings, mobilizations, or military exercises, as it did in 1996 and 2000. Does this relative quiet from mid-2000 mark a change in reunification strategy for the Chinese or just a change in short-term tactics?

This relative quiet may be due, in part, to the sensitive Chinese leadership transition in 2002,³⁵ but to a larger extent is due to a recognition that the key to progress on the Taiwan issue lies more with influencing the United States than it does with influencing Taiwan.

Chinese saber rattling from 1995 through the 2000 Taiwanese presidential election was counterproductive in influencing the Taiwanese electorate.³⁶ In 1996, China's coercive actions and rhetoric was aimed at Lee Tung-hui. He won the election by a wide margin. In 2000, Chinese ire was directed at Chen Shui-bian, from the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party. The attacks against Chen, and Chen's defiance, bolstered his candidacy, and he became the first non-KMT leader of Taiwan. Saber rattling and posturing, however, may have had an effect on the behavior on the leaders of Taiwan (and the United States). After the 1995-96 missile crisis, President Lee was fairly quiet and restrained until his 1999 "special state to state" comment on German radio. Although avidly pro-independence after leaving office in 2000, while in office he steered clear of tacit pro-independence statements. President Chen promised in his inaugural speech not to declare independence, and refrained from provocative statements until his August, 2002, "one nation of each side of the Taiwan Strait" statement. Restraint on the part of Taiwanese leaders, on the other hand, may simply reflect the desires of the Taiwanese electorate, the majority of which are not in favor of declaring independence for fear of provoking an attack from the Mainland. Ignoring or defying China in an election year may be good politics, but when the dust of the election settles, the Taiwan populace expects stability and economic growth.

The Chinese are stuck between the Scylla of unsuccessful meddling in Taiwan domestic politics, and the Charybdis of inaction, risking the further emboldening of Taiwanese leaders and widening of the path of "creeping separationism." The Chinese seem to be in a "prevent defense," giving up short yardage to prevent Taiwan from officially declaring independence, the "red line" that China says Taiwan must not cross. This restrained approach may have expanded the limits of both Chinese and American tolerance of "creeping independence," and may result in China being on their own goal line defending against the one remaining play Taiwan has yet to call – independence.

The Chinese, therefore, have turned to the United States for assistance in reigning in Taiwan. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's December meeting with President Bush in Washington, which seems to have revolved around Taiwan, is the latest evidence of this policy. Wen seems to have gotten what he wanted when President Bush, standing next to Chinese premier, stated that the United States opposed "any unilateral decision by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo," and that "the comments and actions made by the leader of Taiwan indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally to change the status quo, which we oppose."

The recent heavy-handed pressure that President Bush and Bush administration officials have exerted on President Chen is evidence of the diplomatic pressure the Chinese are

injecting into U.S.-China relations over the Taiwan issue. In early February, 2004, Beijing sent a mission to Washington seeking stronger U.S. pressure on Taiwan to forestall a Taiwanese referendum vote on whether to seek a “peace and stability” framework for relations with the mainland.³⁷ Even within the current framework of improved relations between China and the United States, seeking the assistance of the United States as an intermediary is a noticeable departure from past policy, and to some extent indicates the great concern of China’s leaders over “creeping separatism,” and their inability to influence Taiwanese leaders through means short of military action.

Some experts contend that with the passing of the leadership torch to Hu Jintao and a younger generation of leaders, China has begun to take a less confrontational, more sophisticated approach to global and regional affairs. They note that the current crop of Chinese diplomats are better educated, often with advanced degrees from foreign universities, have spent more time in overseas posting, and are generally more skillful and savvy than their predecessors.³⁸ They point to China’s emergence as an active player in the international arena, willing to work within the international system to promote national interests. Even if true, it is hard to imagine much impact of this trend on Chinese thinking on Taiwan reunification, as this issue has always been considered an internal matter not subject to international debate. Nor could this trend explain the sudden shift away from coercive measures after the 2000 Taiwanese presidential election.

China’s recent restraint in cross-Strait relations and improved relations with the United States should by no means be taken to indicate a softening of the Chinese goal of Taiwan reunification or of a change in Taiwan reunification strategy. The strong warnings to Taiwan currently emanating out of Beijing in response to President Chen’s referendum plans, and the dogged requests for the assistance of the United States (perhaps a quid pro quo for Chinese support in the War on Terrorism and in assisting with North Korea) clearly indicate that the “sacred” mission of Taiwan reunification has not slipped from the political agenda of Chinese leaders. Recent statements aimed at restraining Taiwan and mollifying the Chinese made by both the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Deputy Secretary of State while on official visits to China is further evidence that the Chinese message to Washington is getting through loud and clear. The continuing build-up of ballistic missile strength opposite Taiwan and the continuing pace of Chinese military modernization is also a clear signal that the Chinese remain very serious about Taiwan.

Despite the recent “soft” approach to Taiwan, China has been engaged in a much tougher strategy in ensuring Taiwan’s continued isolation in the international community. Because of

China's increasing economic clout, the number of countries that recognize Taiwan has dropped to 26, and the majority of these countries are in Latin America and Africa. China has used its diplomatic power to ensure exclusion of Taiwan from governmental and non-governmental international organizations. In the spring of 2003, in the midst of the SARS epidemic, China again successfully pressured the World Health Organization to reject Taiwan membership, and blocked visits by World Health Organization officials to Taiwan. In February, 2003, the World Trade Organization (WTO), at China's urging, proposed that the title of Taiwan's WTO delegation be changed from "permanent mission" to "office," which would result in the same title as Hong Kong and Macao.³⁹ Taipei officials claim that China has blocked Taiwanese participation in international conferences and exchanges in areas such as agriculture, the arts, the environment, arms control and social issues.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

The number one strategic priority for the Chinese is still continued economic advancement. The Chinese leadership is faced with a number of domestic problems, including unemployment, growing inequity between urban and rural areas, and between coastal and inland areas, non-performing loans and a potential banking crisis, corruption and many public health issues. To address these problems, China requires a stable economic environment and a secure international environment. Beijing, therefore, is fairly desperate to avoid a clash in the Taiwan Strait, and is willing to endure the "status quo" for the foreseeable future. Taiwan, however, has become the wildcard in the schizophrenic triangle of China-Taiwan-United States relations.

Although China has refrained since 2000 from the use of coercive military actions in dealing with events in Taiwan, the level of tension has not decreased. Because coercive tactics did not bring substantial results, China has, for the time being, turned to the United States for assistance. China, however, has not abandoned coercion as an element of its policy toward Taiwan. There is no doubt that in the past 10 years China has improved its ability to wage war against Taiwan. The vast number of ballistic missiles in targeting range of Taiwan has expanded Chinese military options should China determine to use force against Taiwan. Chinese leaders hope that modernization of the PLAAF and the PLAN, together with the increasing ballistic missile threat, could provide the necessary coercive tools to keep Taiwan from straying from the "one China" principle. Chinese leaders and the PLA are prepared, however, to use force if deemed necessary to prevent the permanent separation of Taiwan from China.

The “red line” of Taiwan formally declaring independence is an obvious trigger. A less obvious, but perhaps more likely trigger to some level of conflict is Taiwan’s “creeping separatism.” The level of Chinese military threat to Taiwan, therefore, is more dependent on the actions of Taiwan’s leaders than in the past. The dynamics of Taiwanese democracy, resulting, as it has, in no major political party publicly supporting reunification under the “one China” principle, indicates that retreat to the status quo circa the 1980s or early 1990s is unlikely. Taipei may continue to “push the envelope,” taking two steps forward, and one step back.

The apparent abandonment of coercive military measures over the past few years and in the lead-up to the 2004 Taiwanese presidential election appears to reflect not a change in willingness to use coercion, but a realization on the part of Chinese leaders that meddling in Taiwan domestic politics is counterproductive. Coercive measures, at a time of improved relations with the United States, may inhibit the one productive avenue the Chinese have found for pressuring Taiwan: the assistance of the United States. The Chinese may be bidding their time, in the hopes that President Chen’s reelection bid falls short, and the Kuomintang-People’s First Party ticket, which the Chinese perceive as more moderate, is brought to power. If so, the Chinese may have exaggerated expectations of the benefits of dealing with a new administration,⁴¹ and may be forced to rely on overt coercive measures to prevent Taiwan’s further separation from China.

The Chinese have not changed their strategy on Taiwan reunification. The coercive element of China’s reunification policy is ever-present. China’s underlying strategy of peaceful reunification with Taiwan, backed up by the threat of force, remains in place. The absence over the past few years of overt coercive measures should be seen as a short-term change in tactics, a temporary sheathing of the sword, in response to improved relations with the United States and uncertainty on how to influence the Taiwanese populace.

Should the recent cooperative relationship between the United States and China deteriorate in the near future, or should the ability or willingness of the United States to pressure Taiwanese leaders fall short of Chinese expectations, the underlying, seething, frustration of the Chinese leadership, may cause the bubble of restraint to burst.

WORD COUNT= 6,114

ENDNOTES

¹ See, for example, Richard Halloran, "Taiwan," *Parameters* 33 (Spring 2003): 22, Andrew Scobell, *The U.S. Army and the Asia/Pacific*, Strategic Studies Institute (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College, 2001), p. 7, and Kurt M. Campbell and Dereck J. Mitchell, "Crisis in the Taiwan Strait," *Foreign Affairs*, 80 (July/August 2001): 14-15.

² Robert S. Ross, "Navigating the Taiwan Strait," *International Security* 27 (Fall 2002): 55, and "Memorandum of Conversation, by the Secretary of State," January 5, 1950, U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1950, Vol 6 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1976), pp. 260-261.

³ John Cooper, *Taiwan: Nation-State or Province* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2003), 50.

⁴ *Ibid*, 204.

⁵ 22 USC 3301, *et seq.*

⁶ See, for example, the foreword of *China's National Defense in 2002*, Beijing: Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, December 2002. See also, Chen Qimao, "China's New Approaches to a Peaceful Solution of the Taiwan Issue," *American Foreign Policy Interests* 25 (December 2003): 514.

⁷ Ed Lanfranco, "China Would Risk Much Over Taiwan," *The Washington Times*, December 15, 2003, p. 18.

⁸ Halloran, 25-26, and Robert Scalapino, "Taiwan – Opportunities and Challenges," in Alexander C. Tan, Steve Chan, Calvin Jillson, eds., *Taiwan's National Security: Dilemmas and Opportunities*, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2001), 13. For the usefulness of the United States to Mao Zedong and the CCP in mobilizing the Chinese people, see Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁹ Halloran, 33, and Robert Ross, "Navigating the Taiwan Strait, Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and U.S.-China Relations," *International Security* 27 (Fall 2002): 54.

¹⁰ Halloran, 33, and Ross, 54.

¹¹ Yossef Bodansky, "Has Beijing Resolved to go to War," *Defense and Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy* 28 (March 2000): 6. Beijing's thinking about Taiwan policy seems to have been influenced among other things by a major debate about Chinese national security that took place in 1999. See David M. Finkelstein, *China Reconsiders Its National Security: 'The Great Peace and Development Debate of 1999'* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses Corporation, 2000).

¹² Andrew Scobell, *The U.S. Army and the Asia/Pacific*, Strategic Studies Institute (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College, 2001), 12.

¹³ Roy Denny, "Tensions in the Taiwan Strait," *Survival* 42 (Spring 2000): 78.

¹⁴ See, for example, Justin Bernier and Stuart Gold, "China's closing window of opportunity," *Naval War College Review* 56 (Summer 2003): 72-86, Michael O'Hanlon, "Why China Cannot Conquer Taiwan," *International Security* 25 (Fall 2000): 51-86, Ivan Eland, "The China-Taiwan Military Balance: Implications for the United States," Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing 74 (Washington D.C., February 5, 2003), and Ivan Eland, "Is Chinese Military Modernization a Threat to the United States," Cato Institute Policy Analysis 465 (Washington D.C., January 23, 2003).

¹⁵ Bernier and Gold, 80.

¹⁶ James Holt, "The China-Taiwan Military Balance," *The Project on Defense Alternatives*, January 7, 2000, available at www.com.org/pda/nolt99.pdf, and Ivan Eland, "Is Chinese Military Modernization a Threat to the United States," 8.

¹⁷ Scobell, *The U.S. Army and the Asia/Pacific*, 10.

¹⁸ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003), 174, and Lijin Sheng, *China's Dilemma, The Taiwan Issue*, (Singapore Institute of Southeast Asian Studies): 16.

¹⁹ Lijin Sheng, 16.

²⁰ Arthur S. Ding, "The Lessons of the 1995-1996 Military Taiwan Strait Crisis: Developing a New Strategy Towards the United States and Taiwan," in Laurie Burkitt, Andrew Scobell and Larry Wortzel, eds., *The Lessons of History: The Chinese People's Liberation Army at 75*, Strategic Studies Institute (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College, 2003), 379.

²¹ Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March*, 176, 177.

²² Ding, 383.

²³ *ibid*, 387.

²⁴ Adam Ward, "China and America: Trouble Ahead," *Survival* 45 (Autumn 2003): 43, and Campbell and Mitchell, 17-18.

²⁵ Ward, 43, Scobell, *The U.S. Army and the Asia/Pacific* 9, and Denny Roy, "China's Reaction to American Predominance," *Survival* 45 (Autumn 2003): 62.

²⁶ Evan S. Medeiros and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's New Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs* 82 (November/December 2003): 24.

²⁷ Medeiros and Fravel, 26.

²⁸ *ibid*, 43, and Roy, 62.

²⁹ *Chinese Military Power*, Report of an Independent Task Force (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2003).

³⁰ Bodansky, 5.

³¹ President Chen's full pledge was that "as long as the CCP regime has no intention to use military force against Taiwan, I pledge that during my term in office, I will not declare independence, I will not change the national title, I will not push forth the inclusion of the so-called "state-to-state" description in the Constitution, and I will not promote a referendum to change the status quo in regard to the question of independence or unification. Furthermore, the abolition of the National Reunification Council or the National Reunification Guidelines will not be an issue." (http://www.president.gov.tw/1_president/e_subject-043.htm).

³² In April, 2001, an American EP-E3 surveillance aircraft collided with a Chinese jet fighter off of China's southern coast. The pilot of the Chinese aircraft died. The American aircraft made an emergency landing on Hainan Island, where the Chinese detained the crew for several days.

³³ Medeiros and Fravel, 28.

³⁴ Deng, 391

³⁵ Ward, 50.

³⁶ Chen Qimao, 517, Deng 391, Christianson, Medeiros and Taylor, 28

³⁷ Joseph Kahn, Beijing Urges Bush to Act to Forestall Taiwan Vote, *New York Times*, February 6, 2004

³⁸ Medeiros and Fravel, 6

³⁹ Eugene Chien, "Taiwan Has Had Enough of China's Bullying," *American Foreign Policy Interests* 25 (August 2003): 359.

⁴⁰ Robert Marquand, "China Throwing Diplomatic Elbows to Isolate Taiwan; Beijing has Recently Thwarted Taiwan's Free Trade Negotiations and Attendance at International Conferences," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 19, 2003, p.7.

⁴¹ Ward, 52.

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